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## ABSTRACT

In spite of difficulties in analyzing student retention in community college programs and courses, certain facts about student attrition are known. First, students who drop out of class or school tend to have lower grades than students who persist. Second, the ability of students to drop in and out of community colleges at will has negative effects on the curriculum. Third, high attrition rates are evidence of a college's failure to socialize its students into the academic and social norms of the institution. Fourth, high attrition is likely to be associated with low faculty morale. Finally, for the many students who are ill-prepared for the academic rigors of college, withdrawal may be an appropriate action. Drawing from these assumptions, Santa Fe Community College's English Department developed a series of recommendations for a departmental retention plan to reduce high in-class attrition rates in introductory English classes. These recommendations stress that the retention program must emerge from the department as a whole and urge the department to: (1) instigate a thorough demographic analysis of student attrition within specific English courses; (2) augment the academic advising of targeted student populations; (3) examine methods of increasing student/instructor out-of-class contact without overburdening instructors; (4) draw upon the expertise of its instructors to gather pedagogical devices for enhancing student participation within the classroom; (5) integrate sections of the targeted course(s) with sections from other disciplines; (6) enforce a strict class attendance policy; (7) increase the number of honors courses in English; and (8) evaluate quantitatively and qualitatively the effectiveness of its retention program at the end of each term and formally present these results to the college administration.

(JMC)

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Student Retention within Targeted English Courses  
at Santa Fe Community College

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The decades of the 50s, 60s and early 70s, decades during which enrollments in higher education ballooned from 2.5 to 8.6 million, typically did not breed administrative concern over student retention. Most institutions, in fact, were more likely to be struggling with philosophical and administrative crises centered on this cascade of students, many of whom had been traditionally absent from college and university classrooms, than with how best to keep these students in the classroom. Yet, state and national economic uncertainties, a shrinkage of the traditional college-age cohort, and a shift from the philosophical mind set that students have a right to fail to one that students have a right to be assisted in passing have combined to make retention an issue in program planning and evaluation on many college and university campuses.

Efforts to analyze retention programs from a macro point of view are futile: American higher education is within state political and administrative domains and, thus, varies considerably from state to state; different strata of American higher education--namely public vs. private as well as comprehensive community college vs. college vs. university--have their own missions and, thus, vary considerably from one to the next in their attitudes towards students; and student populations differ from institution to institution, let alone from stratum to stratum, thus making one institution's retention program largely

ineffective at another institution.

Retention program analysis, therefore, is most productive if examined from a micro point of view. Even such variables which may be impossible to qualify can still hamper effective analysis. For example, a program to retain students in class or school must identify why students withdraw from class or school or why they fail a class or flunk out of school. Yet, credible research designs are compromised by the inherent difficulty of obtaining information from students once they have left campus, and, even if this information is obtained, some reasons for attrition like an unwillingness on the part of the student to work diligently are often repressed and, therefore, misrepresented. Moreover, institutional efforts to retain some students can be misguided since their meeting of educational goals has mitigated their attrition and many of the reasons for student attrition like personal and work-related issues cannot be influenced by institutions.

Despite these difficulties with retention program analysis, numerous certainties regarding student attrition exist. First, students who drop out of a class or school tend to have lower grade point averages than students who remain. For example, at Northern Virginia Community College, the mean grade point average for students withdrawing from a class or classes was 1.90 compared to 2.64 for students successfully completing the class,

and "the majority of non-returning students had GPAs of 2.00 or less (58%), with 33 percent having a GPA of 1.00 or less. In comparison, the majority of returning students had a GPA of 3.00 or higher (73%) and only eight percent had a GPA of 1.00 or less" (Friedman & Dennett, 1985, p. 10-11).

Second, according to Arthur M. Cohen, "When students are allowed to drop in and out at will, the institution's curriculum [specifically that of a community college] takes on the configuration of grade 13 plus remedial education" (1984, p. 5). Such a configuration is not conducive to the complete mission of the comprehensive community college--not only to provide remediation where needed, but also to advance successfully that portion of its clientele interested in the Associate of Arts or Associate of Science degrees through these degrees. Thus, such a community college is a postsecondary institution and not merely an extension of high school.

Third, an institution with a high attrition rate, if that institution has selective admissions, has failed to select its students prudently and possibly has failed to socialize its students properly to the academic and social norms of that institution; on the other hand, an institution with a high attrition rate, if that institution does not have selective admissions like the open door policy at most community colleges, has failed not in the selection process but in the process of

socializing its students. Thus, even at community colleges, social and academic orientation to the institution's values is an issue (Bean, 1986, p.48).

Next, "A high attrition rate," argues Bean, "is likely to be associated with low faculty morale" (p. 48). Such an attrition rate is highly visible to faculty in their classrooms and often is taken as a personal reflection of their teaching abilities. If this high attrition is at a community college, the resulting image that the college is an extension of high school could easily erode the professional self-image of community college faculty as well as limit the number of sophomore-level courses which are often the more specialized courses drawing upon the faculty's discipline expertise.

Finally, a reality of student attrition is that many students who withdraw from a class or school are not adequately prepared for the academic rigors of college and, at least at that time, should withdraw. The concern in such instances is with interventional academic advising before the student disappears so that alternatives like remediation and cooling out can be offered in the place of dropping out permanently.

Thus, in an effort to deal substantively with student retention, I focus on the comprehensive community college stratum and specifically Santa Fa Community College. Even more

specifically, I focus on recommendations for in-class student retention for faculty-identified course(s) within the English department. Thinking that it is unlikely an analysis can be too micro in its focus, I develop concrete recommendations that can be broached by the department--recommendation which in amended form may become a catalyst for College-wide debate on student retention.

Santa Fe Community College has grown in excess of ten percent each of the last three academic years (1985-1989); and class space--not declining student enrollment--is the variable most likely to curb continued growth. The English department at SFCC likewise has grown during the past four years from eighteen full-time and nine part-time members to twenty-three full-time and twenty-four part-time members. Such sustained growth has warranted a focus by the College and the English department less on student retention and more on this growth.

Nonetheless, in-class attrition (defined as earning an F in or withdrawing from a class) in introductory level English and math courses for the 1988 winter term was 43 percent and 45.3 percent respectively and for the 1989 spring term was 49.4 percent and 44.3 percent respectively--figures higher than those at Jefferson Community College in Louisville, Kentucky which facilitated the establishment of the Recruitment, Retention,

Attrition program at that school (Noel, 1985, p. 411). Even though the College has implemented several steps to address student attrition, steps like developing an elaborate developmental program which places 45 percent of all beginning students into English remediation courses and 51 percent of all beginning students into math remediation courses, a college-wide forum addressing possible student retention programs is needed.

Since the leadership of the English department is acutely concerned with the attrition rates of the department as well as the College, recommendations for a focused departmental retention program can find a forum for discussion and possible implementation within the department, and the department, in turn, may act as a vehicle for college-wide recommendations.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

##### (1)

A departmental retention program must emerge from the department as a whole since implementation of such a program cannot be effective if mandated from the administration or a select subset of the department. A retention project at Williamsport Area Community College, for example, "enjoyed a reasonable degree of support within the campus community because of its genesis within the deliberations of a succession of

faculty committees studying various aspects of retention" (Martin, 1987, p.17).

The SFCC English department should make use of its informal lunch forum to initiate discussion and then proceed with the direction and at the pace specified by its faculty. Prior to this forum, the English chairperson and other concerned faculty members could briefly introduce this topic at a faculty meeting to sensitize the department as to its possible relevance to the department as a whole.

(2)

The department must instigate a thorough demographic analysis of student attrition within specified English courses to assist proper focusing of the retention program. Attrition surely differs between ENC 1101 and ENC 2301 as well as between full-time and part-time students. Since a generic retention program will have less effect than a focused program, the department must decide upon which course(s) and population(s) to concentrate its efforts.

(3)

In some fashion, the department must act to augment academic advising with regard to the targeted student population(s).

The department can work in conjunction with academic counselors to educate these counselors concerning specified course requirements and goals as well as to be educated by them

concerning mechanisms for recognizing student attitudes and skills so that specified courses are not at the outset too removed from these student attitudes and skills. Cohen argues, "The thread running through all these newly devised orientation programs is that counselors or other non-instructional personnel are involved in the planning and execution of the courses and that orientation is mandatory for certain categories of students" (1984a, p. 5-6).

The department can also establish on a volunteer basis department advisors who are assigned at a ratio of one to approximately fifteen students from the target cohort. Advisors would complete a training session organized by the department and academic advising and would be encouraged to meet periodically with their assigned students. Since the size of this target cohort may well make a comprehensive advising system impractical, a study of the attrition rates of students assigned to volunteer faculty advisors can be conducted to examine the effectiveness of such advisors.

(4)

**The department should** examine methods of increasing student/instructor out-of-class contact without making such contact burdensome for the instructors.

Numerous studies conclude that "informal contacts [between students and faculty] focusing on intellectual/literary or

artistic interests, values issues, or future career concerns" have significant impact on the students' intellectual growth, social integration into the college community, and course and college retention (Pascarella, 1980, p. 565). A series of discussion sessions on relevant topics for the targeted course(s), for instance, could be organized by an instructor or instructors for their sessions of a targeted course and could meet out of the classroom perhaps in faculty units.

(5)

The department should draw upon the expertise of its instructors to gather pedagogical devices for involving student participation within the classroom since such involvement heightens student/instructor contact out of the class and creates a classroom environment which itself may enhance retention.

Wilson et al. determined from a 1974 study "that faculty characteristics significantly associated with the total amount of nonclassroom contact with students included orientations which regard education as an interactive process between teachers and learners, as well as classroom behaviors which appear to invite student participation and discussion both in class and beyond it. Thus, those faculty who were sought out by students beyond the classroom tended to give clues as to their 'social-psychological accessibility' for such interactions through their in-class teaching practices and attitudes" (Pascarella, 1980, p. 561).

Moreover, a study of the retention of adult women students at the Community College of the Finger Lakes determined not only that "persisters had more formal and informal contact with faculty, viewing both types of relationships as part of their academic growth . . . [but also that] social integration for persisters . . . involved positive contact with other students in the classroom or between classes . . ." (Starks, 1987, p. 1).

The advocacy of an instructional style per se is not a goal of this recommendation. Instead, practical "tips" can be shared with the assumption that at least some of these tips do contribute to increases of in-class retention.

(6)

The department should explore integrating sections of the targeted course(s) with sections from another discipline so that the content area of the other discipline can be reinforced through writing assignments in the targeted course(s) and English skills can be reinforced through assignments in this other discipline.

Such integration sends a clear signal to students that English skills are not trivial; they have practical importance outside English courses and must be mastered within English courses. This signal may boost student motivation and, thereby, student retention.

(7)

A strict class attendance policy in the targeted course(s) must be enforced with clearly stated consequences for poor attendance.

The National Study of College and University Responses to Low-Achieving Students in 1982 concluded that effective programs for low-achieving students inevitably have a rigid attendance policy. Too often students at Santa Fe Community College, especially first-term students, fail or withdraw from a course because they interpret the increased freedoms of college over high school as an invitation to delay academic commitment. If a student views an immediate cost to being absent, then he or she may be more likely to attend class and, thereby, more likely to succeed.

(8)

The department should expand its support of the College's honors program by increasing the number of English honors offerings.

Retention for the targeted course(s) can be improved if the academic needs of weak students are met. Yet, retention for such a course or courses can also be improved if academically sound students are recruited into the College. The honors program draws successful students to the College and, thereby, most likely into the target course(s).

(9)

The department should evaluate quantitatively and qualitatively the effectiveness of its retention program at the end of each term and, if significant results are found, formally present these results to the Dean for Instruction and other appropriate College personnel and committees.

In conclusion, a retention program initiated by the SFCC English department will not magically eliminate the near fifty percent attrition rate often present in some English courses. Many of the students who fail or withdraw from such courses are not able or willing to work at the college level, a level the department must act to maintain.

Such a retention program, however, can unite departmental energy and vision to identify and assist those students for whom SFCC is a viable and notable institution of higher education.

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